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Rethinking democracy and education: Alternatives to capitalist reproduction or writing the poetry of the future?

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What stands between individuals and their freedom to build futures where no one is enslaved, subjected or exploited by powerful individuals, groups, forms of organisation, elites, class divisions, faiths or states? Is there hope for educational strategies in a contemporary scene pervaded by discourses where truth, the stock-in-trade of education, is replaced by 'post-truth', which deals in undermining knowledge and reason?

A century after the publication of *Democracy and Education*, in which Dewey argued for the mutually dependent relationship linking a legitimate education system and a thriving democracy, many would argue that democracy and education have been decoupled, and that both have been diminished and devalued as a result (Labaree, 2011; Schostak and Goodson, 2012). If, as some have argued, we are living in a 'post-democratic' society (Crouch, 2004), where expertise is deployed to address social and economic problems, and where governance is a matter of rational-technical management, then the political, as a choice to be made between visions of society, is no more. As Fukuyama (2006) argued, following the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989), we have seen the 'end of history' – that is, the end of the great battles between political ideologies. All that remains, the

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argument goes, is to administer and refine the winning narrative. Hence, for example, recent decades have witnessed the systematic translation, in education and wider society, of democratic deliberation and decision-making into techno-rational matters framed in terms of instrumentalism and efficiency (Brown, 2015).

However, the ascendance of this technical rationality has been paralleled by a number of developments that threaten to undermine the stable social formations it assumes and seeks to entrench. These developments include:

- Growing inequality in wealth and income, highlighted recently by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2016) and other commentators (Atkinson, 2015; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012; Varoufakis, 2015)
- Declining participation and trust in democratic processes in Western and other contexts (Mair, 2013)
- Increasing precarity amongst workers (Neilson, 2015; Standing, 2014)
- Growing extremism in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere, including religious extremism and growing support for extremist political parties

Such issues have been repressed under narratives of efficiency and improvement. However, the recent Brexit (that is, the campaign to leave the European Union: BRitain + EXIT) and Trump campaigns, along with increasing concerns about the return of far-right sentiments in politics (Neiwert, 2017; Stocker, 2017), are testaments to the return of the repressed. In each case, arguments were driven by anger, nostalgia, fear and resentment rather than the rational assessment of economic, political and social evidence. These issues are variously picked up by the first three articles in this special issue.

Matthew Clarke addresses the issues of desire, ideology, enjoyment and fantasy from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. The power of this approach is to highlight what we should all already know: that we are not rational machines, performatively driven, but bodies whose ideas, demands and perceptions are influenced by feelings and desires that can produce illusions and violence as much as knowledge, evidence and peaceful coexistence. For Clarke, the pessimistic assessment of the contemporary state of affairs can be addressed, 'in spite of it all', by an educational practice that enables us to 'let go of the fantasies that keep us tethered to our unfreedom'.

In the production of fantasies which sustain a fear and hatred of others that fed nationalist and white supremacist discourses in both the Brexit and Trump campaigns, perhaps we can see something of the 'trauma' that, Noah De Lissovoy argues, requires us to rethink democratic education. To make this argument, he draws on Negri's discussions of 'constituent power' and Dussel's concept of 'obediential power' in order to engage in a critical dialogue with Dewey's call for a relational and collaborative democracy. What is significant here is a reading of Dewey's arguments as framed in terms of negotiations with a social given. By contrast, the focus on trauma demands that education goes beyond the given, by breaking the bounds of obedience to authorities and deploying an insurrectionary force in order to constitute a desired new order. Articulating this revolutionary desire represents a critical role for educationists in undertaking what De Lissovoy calls a 'pedagogy of longing'. Longing, in this sense, is to be thought of as a collective and political project, not just a personal disposition. The pedagogy of longing, as De Lissovoy writes, 'presents to students what has been refused, and invites them to remember their need for and commitment to it'.

The trauma that articulates fantasies as symptoms of what has been repressed and needs to be addressed psychologically, politically and thus socially can be exploited, as evidenced by the Brexit and Trump campaigns, *or* it can be educationally and democratically explored through a dialogue between people who address the otherness they see in each other as free and equal beings. This is essentially the argument presented by John Schostak, who builds on Rosanvallon's historical study of the 'society of equals' in relation to Balibar's (1994) radical democratic principle of *égalité* ('equaliberty'). Achieving such a society of equals, where the freedom of each individual is founded on the principle that no one person has a greater voice than another in debates, decisions and courses of action, requires that the forms of organisation and discourses of inequality that sustain elite disciplinary powers be challenged and countered. Perhaps, as De Lissovoy argues, this is first addressed through a 'pedagogy of longing' where, as Clarke writes, we learn to let go of our fantasies tethering us to unfreedoms. However, alongside this, Schostak argues, the major institutions (whether, for example, as discourses reinforcing discrimination, media corporates, schools focused on discipline and control, or the everyday workplace of bosses and employees), whereby the consent of people is daily manufactured to endorse the interests, values, desires and demands of elites, have to be deconstructed and set aside. He sees some basis for optimism in relation to such change in the worldwide co-operative movement, as providing a significant material- and values-driven alternative to neo-liberal, greed-driven, capitalist markets. Without globally sustainable, alternative forms of social organisation, radical democratic education remains at the margins, unable to be an insurrectional force capable of going beyond the givens of the prevailing elite-driven global order – hence the degree of pessimism to be found in Dewey (see Mayhew and Edwards, 1936) and in the critical review of democratic education undertaken by Fielding and Moss (2011). Much reformist hope has also been placed on mainstream schooling to bring social change, whether in the UK as comprehensives, which sought to challenge the elitism of private education and grammar schools (Benn, 2012), or more generally as creating a meritocratic society capable of encouraging social mobility. By and large, it has failed (Blacker, 2013; Marsh, 2011). Contra such pessimism, Schostak sees some glimmers of hope in a radical democracy that is coupled with the economic and socially transformative potential of a global co-operative movement, able to give substance to individual freedoms in the context of the 'society of equals'.

The final three articles document attempts to bring the demands for freedom, democracy and equality into the institutional realities of contemporary practice. These articles present alternatives that can be read as prefigurative practices – that is, social practices and forms of organisation appropriate to the desired more fully democratic future society (Fielding and Moss, 2011).

Núria Simó-Gil and Antoni Tort-Bardolet focus on the concept of citizenship appropriate for a democracy. This is not so much something to be achieved in the future but something to be practised in the here and now – that is to say, there is no state where someone, such as a child, lives as a being who is not-yet-a-citizen. The implication for the constitution of the democratic school is then explored in case studies of five primary schools and five secondary schools. From reflections on the case studies, they argue that 'another school is possible'. They illustrate the power of critically reflective debate to reconceive schools as 'a public space for all citizens, a collective workshop of many purposes and possibilities' that is at once person-centred and open to 'working closely with other schools and local authorities'. This deliberately evokes the ethos of the Deweyan laboratory school. The focus on

living citizenship seeks to provide a legacy of experiences capable of addressing wider contemporary social, economic and political issues.

Tony Leach draws into debate Dewey's concept of democratic education, Bhabha's 'third space' and Buber's *I-Thou/I-It* constructs in order to deepen the insights into what it means to create a place where 'teachers and students create a space where classroom practice is democratically teacher-guided and student-informed'. Buber's *I-It* relation refers to the technical instrumentalisation of relationships between people, as evidenced, for example, in examinations and performance criteria that reduce individuals to being units or tools useful to society. Here there is neither equality nor dialogue. Leach starts by highlighting the extent of the challenge facing any attempt to counter this in the everyday, typical classroom. In order to achieve a human, *I-Thou*, relationship between individuals, each first must recognise the equality of the other as a condition for entering into dialogue. The struggles of those in Leach's study to do so are illustrated through vignettes, where creating a 'democratic learning environment is seen to be both troublesome and an emancipatory experience'. However, unless the *I-It* norm is critically addressed, it is argued, 'no real and lasting improvements in relationships in the classroom, and school improvement,' can be made.

This *I-It* relation can be seen at work from another perspective in Charlotte Haines Lyon's focus on the market-driven definition of 'choice'. Here, choice, as Schostak notes in his article, derives in large part from the rational-choice model promoted by Buchanan and Tullock (1962) that has influenced governmental policies since the Thatcher and Regan era. Indeed, such rational-choice thinking is perhaps the perfect embodiment of the *I-It* relationship. Haines Lyon foregrounds the impact of such a conception of choice on the relationship between schools and parents. Making the wrong choice in sending their children to one school rather than another, 'better' school, she argues, renders parents as 'irresponsible'. There is, effectively, a Rancière-like policing of the ability of parents to choose, talk about and engage with schools. Haines Lyon draws on her doctoral research in order to map alternative discourses. This research involved the use of community philosophy as a way of bringing parents together to shape the research and to question their own practices and those of the school. Haines Lyon argues that the involvement of parents in school life requires recognising and embracing 'the heterogeneous array of family lives and values'; however, this diversity of voices has been colonised by neo-liberal education systems, effectively removing the meaningful agency of parents by reducing this agency to individually and instrumentally conceived notions of self-serving 'choice'. Haines Lyon's article, in this sense, returns us to the beginning – that is, to the real impacts and typically overwhelming influence of neo-liberal rationalities and the technical, rational, elite-driven, political economies they serve.

Each of the articles has tried, in its different way, to counter the sense of pessimism and fatality engendered by the institutionalised discourses, structures and forms of organisation of contemporary elite-dominated societies. They have done so by opening up those spaces of often covert and suppressed agency that in an insurrectionary moment have the potential to reset the conditions of social organisation. As editors of this special issue, we believe it is this very agency that is to be found and articulated in practice. Furthermore, we believe that, as David Harvey (2014: 99) urges, we have an 'obligation to write the poetry of our own future against the background of the rapidly evolving contradictions of capital's present'. Thus, we take the critical position that a founding principle of democracy is the co-extensiveness of freedom and equality (Balibar, 1994), and that therefore '*the* political' moment, where transitions, transformations and changes become possible, begins with the recognition

of equality between people. In short, as the articles in this collection suggest, it is possible to rethink the philosophical, social and theoretical basis of social and educational organisation to create the conditions for young people to write the poetry of their own futures.

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